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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Rebuilding the CIA

With Congress back in town, all of a sudden everyone on Capitol Hill is asking where was the Central Intelligence Agency as events unfolded in Iran and Afghanistan. If U.S. intelligence operations had been more effective, the nation's affairs in that region most likely would not be in such terrible shape. These questions are giving rise to calls for rebuilding the CIA.

If Congress is serious about revitalizing the agency, there are certain questions it must ask itself first. Has it had enough of the witch-hunt syndrome of the 1970s, when some Congressmen prided themselves on "exposing" alleged CIA abuses? Does it now accept, after detailed investigation, that most of these charges were much ado over not very much? That while CIA funds went to the opposition of Chilean President Allende, for example, there is nothing to suggest CIA involvement in the coup that overthrew him. Is Congress ready to recognize that its own attacks on the agency seriously impaired the nation's ability to maintain an effective influence abroad?

Does Congress believe that the U.S. needs the capacity to conduct covert operations overseas? That is, should the U.S. actively try to prevent an unfriendly power, most particularly the Soviet Union, from destabilizing and then taking control of a country or region vital to our national security? Does the Congress recognize that successful covert operations may ward off a possible situation that might give way to direct military conflict, most notably in the Persian Gulf region?

If the Congress cannot agree to halt the witch-hunts, to maintain strict security about CIA activities, to accept covert operations abroad, then there is no point in discussing the reconstruction of the CIA. If Congress does not trust the President with the power to conduct such operations, under the type of congressional oversight that existed before the CIA was gutted, it may as well vote to abolish the agency altogether. On the other hand, if Congress is ready to rebuild the CIA, then it should get on with the job immediately.

The most essential of these is repeal of the Hughes-Ryan amendment, passed with minimal debate in 1974 during the heyday of the CIA "exposures." Unwilling to face squarely the prospect of outlawing covert operations abroad, CIA opponents moved to make them administratively impossible, by requiring that they be reported to no fewer than 61 Senators and 134 Representatives on eight committees, plus their associated staff. Obviously, nothing covert is possible under such restrictions.

The risks of a breach of security are so numerous that, according to CIA director Stansfield Turner, on at least one occasion an allied intelligence service "withdrew a proposal for joint action." Former director William Colby said that "every" new project subjected to the Hughes-Ryan procedure in 1975 was leaked. Senator Moynihan has now introduced legislation to repeal the amendment; we only hope that this essential item of business will not be delayed by the inevitable debate on the First Amendment issues raised by other items in the Moynihan package.

Similarly, we would hope that revitalization of the CIA does not have to await a "charter" spelling out what is and is not proper in every conceivable contingency. The Senate Intelligence Committee has been working on such a charter, and would be wiser to scrap the whole project. The Association of Former Intelligence Officers branded the draft proposal, another artifact of the "exposure" heyday, as "long on restrictions, short on flexibility to adjust to changing situations and lacking incentives for greater excellence in intelligence." President Carter in 1978 issued an Executive Order to govern the agency; even those rules may be too harsh, but at least an Executive Order can be corrected overnight whereas modifying a legislated charter could take months or even years.

The CIA also needs an increased budget to facilitate the improvement of its information-gathering and analysis operations and its clandestine activities. Though President Carter has promised a "significant" budget increase next year, the CIA's funds are now at a "rock-bottom" \$5 billion, according to informed estimates, and the boost in spending needs to be hefty.

Even if Congress and the President agree to rebuild the agency, we are not, however, optimistic that substantial improvements can be made anytime soon. The nation's intelligence network will likely take years to rebuild and, in the meantime, the U.S. will be exposed to unforeseen turns of events in vital areas around the globe. It is more than unfortunate that these improvements will have to be made from hindsight rather than foresight.